



Navajo Nation Council - Office of the Speaker

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Cross-Commission Agreement between Navajo Nation and McKinley County moves forward

Council Delegate Edmund Yazzie pleased with movement

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – The Public Safety Committee continues to make great strides in improving services on the Navajo Nation. With a very limited police force of 343 commissioned personnel, public safety is stretched far too thin to accommodate the 27,000 square-mile Navajo reservation.

Navajo Nation Council Delegate Edmund Yazzie (Thoreau), Vice-Chair of the Public Safety Committee (PSC), is pleased to know that the recent Cross-Commission Agreement between the Navajo Nation and the McKinley County Sheriff's Office will finally move forward after years of stalling. This agreement has been long awaited by the Eastern Agency of the Navajo Nation in north-western New Mexico.

The agreement has been in the works for nearly 7-years and it was recently modified to meet the needs of the Navajo Nation in McKinley County, needs that are desperately sought to combat crime on the Navajo Nation. Crimes on Indian reservations surpass the U.S. national average by two or three times, sometimes even more.

Eastern Navajo is comprised of a checkerboard area, which creates a jurisdictional maze that hinders public safety. This lack of public safety in this area prompted the motion of this agreement. The agreement will deal with jurisdictional issues and will provide necessary services to the communities in this area.

Per the agreement, Navajo Nation Public Safety and the McKinley County Sheriff's office will coordinate to identify issues and concerns in dealing with issues that face law enforcement today.

This agreement was established to provide for the orderly, efficient, and effective enforcement of the criminal and traffic laws of the Navajo Nation and the State of New Mexico. The agreement will prevent the jurisdictions from becoming a sanctuary for the violators of the laws of the other and to prevent inter-jurisdictional flight of offenders, this is done all in recognition of the inherent sovereignty of the Navajo Nation and the State of New Mexico.

This agreement is certainly good news for public safety on the Navajo Nation, considering that the majority of the reservation is rural and law enforcement has to deal with challenges of being understaffed when faced with delivering services to the communities.

This land-mark agreement will allow Navajo Nation Police officers to arrest non-Indians, while allowing the McKinley County Sheriff's department the same privilege of making arrests on the reservation within the boundaries of their county. Before the agreement, McKinley County Sheriff's department could not come onto the reservation and Navajo Police officers could not make arrests off the reservation.

The problems of public safety are often attributed to the lack of manpower. Tribal law enforcement departments do not have adequate resources to counteract crime on the reservation.

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Pursuant to the agreement, all cross-commissioned officers and deputies shall have the powers necessary to enforce Navajo Nation or State of New Mexico criminal and traffic laws, including the power to make arrests for any violations to the full extent as allowed by law. Both cooperating agencies will have full authority to coordinate arrests on and off the Navajo reservation.

The agreement was finally signed on Dec. 17, 2007 by Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., McKinley County Sheriff Frank Gonzales, Navajo Nation Public Safety Director Sampson Cowboy, and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson.

The PSC approved this agreement, Legislation No. 0428-07, with a vote of 6-0 on June 26, 2007 and the Intergovernmental Relations Committee also approved this agreement by a vote of 9-0 on July 13, 2007.

Edmund Yazzie is pleased to know that the Public Safety Committee has revived the efforts to move the agreement forward in order to increase law enforcement in parts of the Navajo Eastern Agency.

Yazzie was a police officer for 15-years and knows the pressing challenges that the Navajo Nation faces each day to combat crime on the reservation, challenges that stem from being under-staffed.

This agreement benefits public safety in a huge way, by alleviating the problem of the lack of manpower. If an officer needs back up at a scene in McKinley County, they will more than likely receive the necessary assistance with the recent passage of this agreement.

Yazzie added that the agreement is in its final stages and the next step would be to construct a game plan with McKinley County Sheriff's department, in which final plans will be put in place to expedite the terms of this agreement. Yazzie is awaiting a meeting with Sampson Cowboy to put plans together to expedite the agreement.

Yazzie extends his appreciation to the Public Safety Committee, Sheriff Gonzales of McKinley County, tribal court judges in Shiprock, N.M., Sampson Cowboy, Donovan Brown with the Navajo Nation Department of Justice, Crownpoint Captain Steve Nelson, and several Navajo Nation police officers all have whom shared their experiences to strengthen this proposal.

"This project will benefit victims on the Navajo reservation," Edmund Yazzie said. "I am very grateful for the partnership that we have established with McKinley County and it opens doors for other counties that wish to follow suit."

Public safety issues are not unique to the Navajo Nation, but are echoed in almost all reservations throughout the country. The lack of jail space and lack of officers tops a growing list of issues effecting Indian country today.

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Native Americans and Alaska Native have the highest crime rates in the country, according to statistics provided by the federal government.

It is the hope of the Navajo Nation that this agreement be utilized as a model for additional agreements in counties bordering the Navajo Nation in Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico.

Cowboy explained that the agreement was approved and Council Delegate Edmund Yazzie took the leading role with the Public Safety Committee, who provided their full support. "Mr. Yazzie's knowledge of New Mexico issues helped."

Cowboy added that the Division of Public Safety will benefit from this agreement. "The partnership with New Mexico will improve working relationships and will greatly improve direct services to the communities in New Mexico."

Cowboy also stated that the agreement will take effect as soon as the necessary trainings are completed.

"The implementation of the agreement was a challenge, but it is finally done and we are looking forward to working together to serve the communities on the New Mexico side of the Navajo Nation," Cowboy said. "I thank the Public Safety Committee and the McKinley

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County Sherriff's office for their work on this agreement."

Hope MacDonald-Lonetree (Coalmine Canyon/To Nanees Dizi), Chair of the PSC, also expressed her gratitude to the people involved in pushing this agreement through the process. "This is a good thing and I look forward to a successful joint relationship between our department and the McKinley County Sheriff's Office."

MacDonald-Lonetree explained that this agreement is open for amendments and if things do not work out as smoothly as expected, the Navajo Nation can always revisit the agreement again.

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